

## **Defining special events from a gallery visitor perspective**

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## **Abstract**

In their endeavour to become more visitor-focused, galleries are staging an increasing number of special events. Special events enable galleries to inspire and attract new visitors, and encourage people to become more regular visitors. With the increased use of special events however, it is important that galleries develop an awareness of how their visitors understand and respond to such events. This paper describes a current, continuing research project investigating visitors' perceptions of special events in galleries. Stemming from a previous study that qualitatively explored this issue, the current study uses a quantitative methodology to build on, and further support the findings from the qualitative study.

This paper details the set of categories that were developed from the initial qualitative study, and explains how the quantitative part of the study has been designed to test the importance and accuracy of those categories. The categories represent the perceptions visitors have of what defines a special event at a gallery and how special events differ from a gallery's day-to-day program. While this paper presents a brief overview of the initial findings emerging from a preliminary analysis of the quantitative data, the focus is on explaining and subsequently reflecting upon the suitability of the quantitative methods used to supplement the qualitative research. The statistical data analysis methods used to interpret the questionnaire data, factor analysis and conjoint analysis, and their applications are therefore explained and reflected upon.

## Introduction

In response to contemporary visitor interests and needs, as well as to inspire new audiences, galleries are increasingly staging special events, or marketing elements of their programs as 'special events'. Research has shown that for galleries, using special events as a strategy to develop audiences has been successful (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Caulton, 1998; Winkworth & Dickman, 2001). To continue achieving such successes however, galleries must continue to have an awareness of their visitors' interests and needs. This is why research investigating the effects of special events at galleries on audience development has an important role.

This study responds to the need for audience development research, investigating how gallery visitors perceive special events in a gallery, and how they distinguish these events from a gallery's day-to-day program. A visitor's perceptions can be defined as their interpretations of their environment, and these interpretations determine or modify the subsequent attitudes and expectations visitors might form and the actions they may take (Andrade & May, 2004). When potential and current visitors perceive that a special event will offer the benefits they need, they begin the behavioural process of learning, attitude formation, and decision making that result in attendance at that event (Wells & Prensky, 1996; Stenberg, 1999; Martin, Strack, & Stapel, 2001). Therefore, as perceptions influence attitudes and expectations, understanding visitor perceptions is one of the keys to designing programs and events that meet the interests and expectations of visitors. Furthermore, Jago and Shaw (1999) point out that if managers are to realise the full potential of special events, it is important that appropriate events are fostered and marketed in the most effective manner, and central to this is the identification of a conceptual framework or typology of special events at galleries. A clear framework or typology would also help galleries evaluate such events and subsequently build on the strengths of these events.

To create a clear conceptual typology that defines special events from a visitor perspective, this study began with a qualitative exploration of the issue. From the initial qualitative study, a set of categories were developed to represent the perceptions visitors have of what defines a special event at a gallery and how special events differ from a gallery's day-to-day program. Before discussing these categories however, it is useful to briefly describe how the literature defines special events at galleries. Special events are defined as typically being one-off occasions that are offered for a limited time and positioned as different to what normally occurs in a gallery. They also regularly take on a mass appeal (Axelsen, 2006). Special events are recognised as taking many different forms, but essentially used to create new reasons for visitors to attend. They can be construed to include and combine a number of different elements and events, such as lectures, films, demonstrations, workshops, theatre, temporary 'discovery' rooms, behind-the-scenes tours, virtual experiences, audio-visual programs, tour groups, conferences, seminars, holiday programs, and festivals (Vesk, 1998; Brown, 2002).

A set of ten categories were defined from the qualitative study to represent the perceptions that visitors hold about special events at galleries. Subcategories were also developed to provide definitions of the characteristics of each category. Figure 1 illustrates the categories and subcategories. Each box contains the general perception in bold and a list of the subcategories representing the more specific descriptions of each perception.

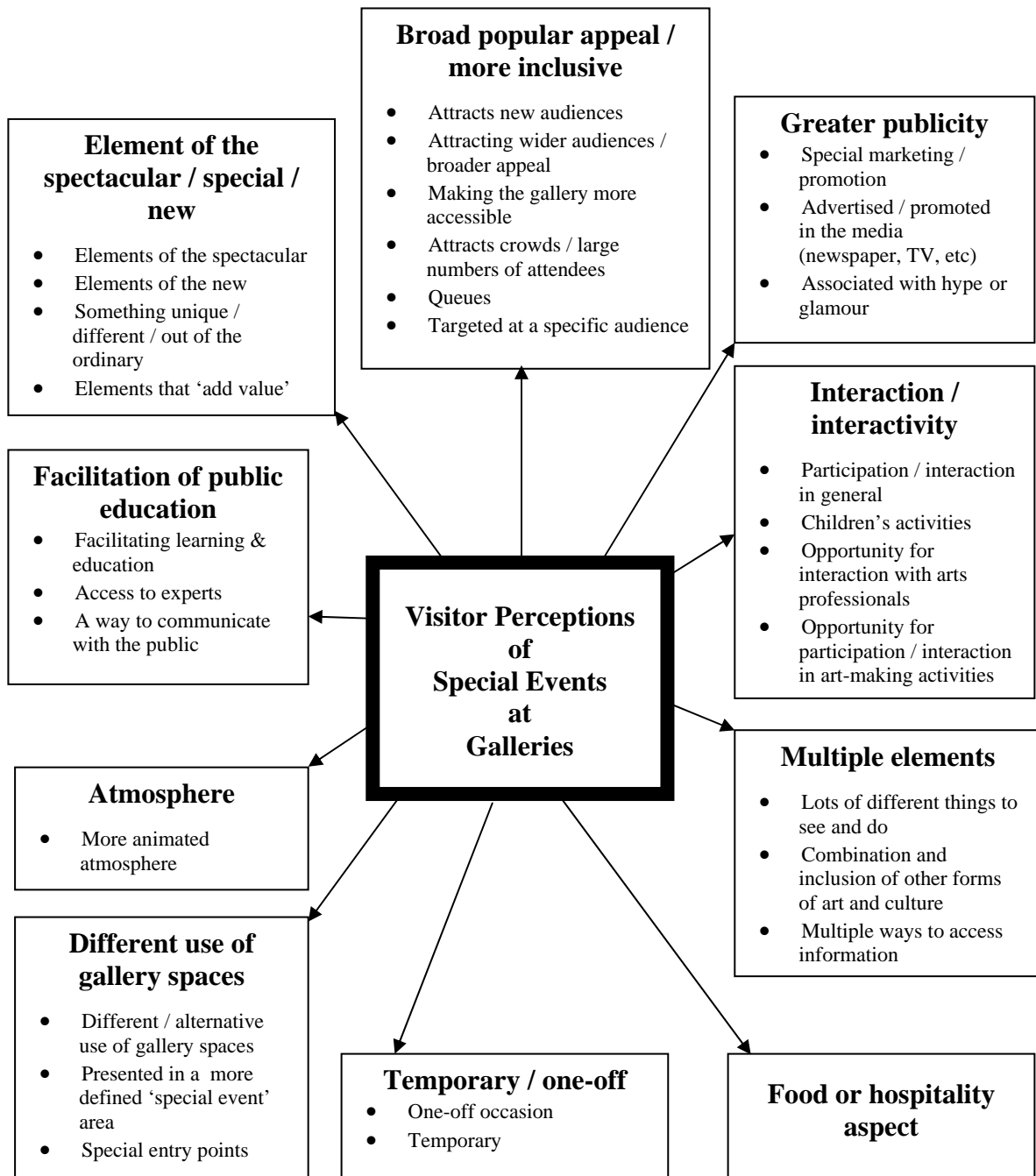


Figure 1: Visitor perceptions of special events at galleries

To assess the importance and accuracy of the perception categories that emerged from the initial qualitative study, and to further build on those findings, a supporting quantitative study is currently being implemented. The quantitative phase of the study will occur in two stages. It is the aim of this paper to explain these two stages and subsequently reflect upon the suitability of the quantitative methods being used to support the qualitative research. A brief overview of the initial findings emerging from a preliminary analysis of the stage one quantitative data is also presented.

### **The quantitative phase of the research**

As the aims of the quantitative phase of the study are to strengthen the findings that emerged from the qualitative study, and subsequently build on those findings, the quantitative phase involves two stages. Stage one focuses on assessing and refining the findings from the qualitative study. This stage therefore continues to focus on the question of how special events are defined from a visitor perspective. The findings from stage one will then be used to structure the research that will occur in stage two. Stage two builds on the findings about visitor perceptions by investigating which of the attributes that visitors' perceive as defining special events are subsequently important in their decisions to attend these special events.

#### Stage one

The aim of stage one is to reflect on the importance and accuracy of the perception categories identified from the initial qualitative study and subsequently ascertain which of these perception categories visitors most closely associate with special events at galleries. The questionnaire developed for stage one of the quantitative phase of research therefore focuses on assessing visitors' interpretations of what defines a special event at an art gallery, and which of these defining features are subsequently important in their decision to attend. The questionnaire achieves this by listing a number of statements about special events at galleries, and respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement for each statement. Each of the statements listed in the questionnaire have been generated from the perception sub-categories illustrated in figure 1. It was important to use the sub-categories rather than use the perception categories themselves because the findings from the qualitative phase showed that a visitor's perception (represented by a single perception category) is not based on a single factor or criterion but on multiple factors (represented by the sub-categories). Furthermore, utilising the sub-categories provides more scope to comprehensively assess the importance and accuracy of each of the perception categories developed from the qualitative phase of the research.

A questionnaire was seen to be the most appropriate means of collecting the necessary data for this study because it is able to garner a large number of responses, essential for the systematic checking of data (Nicholson & Pearce, 2001). The questionnaire in this study uses a six-point Likert-type scale because in questionnaires, Likert-type scales are an accepted technique for obtaining information on human attitudes and behavioural preferences (Santos & Clegg, 1999). A six-point scale rather than a five- or seven-point scale was also utilised so respondents had to make a decision on whether or not they agreed with each statement and to what extent (that is, there was no 'neutral' choice). The questionnaire begins with an open-ended question asking respondents how they think special events in galleries differ from the gallery's day-to-day program. This was purposefully done to ensure that any other defining qualities of special events which may have been overlooked in the initial qualitative study were recorded, and this is important given the complex nature of visitors' perceptions.

Factor analysis is the method that will be used to analyse visitor responses to the questionnaire. It has been chosen to analyse the data because it is a statistical variable reduction procedure that analyses interrelationships among a large number of variables to explain these variables in terms of their common underlying dimensions or factors (Hair et al., 1992). In addition, this type of statistical analysis has been used in the past for motivational and perception studies, and is thus relevant to this research (Nicholson & Pearce, 2001; Kerstetter & Mowrer, 1998; Raybould, 1998; Zyl & Botha, 2004).

A form of factor analysis that is used for the verification of already developed concepts is principal axis factoring (PAF). This type of factor analysis is preferred when clarification of factors with pre-established theory is sort. This method is therefore appropriate for this study as one of the aims of the research is to clarify the perception categories developed from the initial qualitative study. In addition, to facilitate in the interpretation of factors at this stage, it is planned to use a varimax rotation. Alternative rotation methods however, may also be

employed to see which method leads to the most interpretable factor structure. The application of these analysis methods will lead to the identification of a common set of perception categories/factors, and as mentioned, these categories will be used as benchmarks to clarify perception categories developed from the initial qualitative study. The perception categories/factors are also central to the development of a set of indices for use in the conjoint analysis occurring in stage two of the quantitative phase of the research.

It is acknowledged that one danger in using factor analysis for this study is that the data collected will be ordinal, and factor analysis assumes interval data. Ordinal Likert scale items however, are commonly used with interval procedures provided that the scale has at least five categories (as mentioned, the scale used in this study has six categories). In addition, severe departures from intervalness do not seem to affect Type I and Type II errors dramatically and thus factor analysis has commonly been used with ordinal data (Jaccard, James & Wang, 1996).

### Stage two

Stage two of the quantitative phase of the study follows on from stage one by utilising the factors identified from the factor analysis. It is the aim of stage two to augment the applicability of the research by using the knowledge about visitor perceptions of special events in galleries to then investigate which of those perceptions are subsequently important in stimulating visitation. It is findings such as these which will be most important in helping gallery professionals to identify the features of special events that visitors not only strongly associate with the events, but which subsequently draw them to attend. To identify the features/attributes of special events that stimulate attendance, stage two utilises a questionnaire designed to elicit responses that can be analysed using the technique of conjoint analysis.

Conjoint analysis is a technique used to model how people make complex judgements, taking into account that these decisions are made using multiple factors rather than single factors (Intelliquest, 2000). Conjoint analysis attempts to establish utility measures that respondents attach to various attributes of a service. In this study the service is special events at art galleries. These utility measures reflect the relative importance of such attributes and offer realistic portrayals of respondents' choices. Utilising conjoint analysis will enable this study to accurately define visitors' perceptions of special events at art galleries by taking into account the multiple perceptions that visitors have of this complex scenario. The factors identified from the factor analysis conducted in stage one of the study will be used to create different profiles in which descriptions will be specified for each attribute. To give an example, table 1 lists two profiles that could be created if the factors 'greater publicity' (with the attributes 'special marketing / promotion' and 'advertised in the media') and 'food' were identified in stage one.

Table 1: Possible profiles that could be created for use in a questionnaire designed using conjoint analysis techniques

#### **Profile 1**

##### *Greater publicity*

- A special event involves special marketing and promotion
- A special event is not advertised in the media

##### *Food*

- A special event has a food and hospitality aspect

## Profile 2

### *Greater publicity*

- A special event does not involve special marketing and promotion
- A special event is not advertised in the media

### *Food*

- A special event does not involve a food and hospitality aspect

Respondents will be given a questionnaire in which they will be asked to rate out of ten which of the researcher-created profiles best describes a special event at an art gallery. Conjoint analysis then computes the respondents' utilities for each factor level and gives an indication of the influence each factor has had on the respondents' preference for a particular combination of factor levels. This therefore ultimately enables the researcher to calculate the relative importance of various attributes to respondents, which subsequently enables accurate modelling of human decision-making processes in a realistic manner.

Conjoint analysis is commonly regarded as one of the most accurate and discriminating ways to measure the importance of various features of services, however it has been criticised in the past as attributes are defined by the researcher and may not be relevant to consumers (Caldwell & Coshall, 2003). This has been overcome in this study by conducting many preliminary analyses, including the factor analysis, to extract the factors that pertain best to gallery visitors.

## Data collection

The research for the quantitative stage of this study is occurring at the Ipswich Art Gallery. This gallery regularly stages special events as a strategy of audience development. As previously discussed, two different questionnaires are being used to collect the appropriate data in each phase of the quantitative study (the second questionnaire is being developed in response to the findings produced from analysing responses to the first questionnaire). The visitors targeted to respond to each of the questionnaires are people attending different special events at the gallery. It is important that only people attending the special events are targeted because the focus of the study is special event attendance. In administering the questionnaires, interviewers were asked to identify a mark (such as a seat in the gallery) and approach every  $x^{\text{th}}$  person who passed it. This requirement was implemented to ensure a systematic sample of visitors.

## Conclusion

At present 174 surveys have been collected, of which 168 are useable for data analysis. The literature is conflicting on the sample size needed to perform factor analysis, however most authors tend to agree that between 200 to 400 completed questionnaires need to be obtained to ensure a valid interpretation of factors (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988; Marsh, Balla & McDonald, 1988; Comrey & Lee, 1992; Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). For this study, it is therefore endeavoured to collect at least another 200 completed surveys before performing a conclusive factor analysis on the resultant data.

For the purposes of this paper, a preliminary analysis has been conducted on the 168 useable questionnaires. From this analysis it can be tentatively construed that five to eight factors will emerge as perception categories that can be explored further through conjoint analysis to obtain definitive categories that define special events at art galleries. In addition, these factors all confirm that visitors agree with the perception categories emerging from the initial qualitative study.

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